

# LESSONS OF THE HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

*The New Proletarian*

J. A. LUKACS

FOR the past year in the United States, it has been a very positive asset to be a Hungarian. This is evident, for example, from a revision in the lines of that luminous and lovely musical, *My Fair Lady*. Those who are acquainted with *Pygmalion*, or who saw *My Fair Lady* at any time between its opening on March 15, 1956 (which is, incidentally, Hungarian Freedom Day) and the day on which *Time* proclaimed the Hungarian Freedom Fighter as the Man of the Year, will recall that the only disagreeable character in the entire play was one Zoltán Kárpáthy—a Hungarian. In the original version Colonel Pickering exclaims: "Was *he* there? That dreadful Hungarian?" In the Mark Hellinger Theater last January, my wife and I started in our seats to discover that Kárpáthy had since turned into a "dreadful Rumanian": the very clear implication being that there were no longer any dreadful Hungarians. This has also been suggested lately by a bevy of American authors, including James Michener, Archibald MacLeish, and John Hersey, to all of whom I am indebted for having portrayed *all* my native compatriots (the alien and blood-thirsty secret police of course excepted) as heroic individuals animated by the loftiest principles.

REPORTING on his recent visit with the Hungarian refugees at Camp Kilmer in New Jersey, J. A. LUKACS—himself a native of Hungary who came to this country in 1946—attempts to place the uprising in Budapest last year in a broad historical perspective. Mr. Lukacs is lecturer in history at La Salle College in Philadelphia; and besides being the author of *The Great Powers and Eastern Europe* (1953), he has contributed articles to *Commonweal*, *Encounter*, and numerous other periodicals.

Only twelve years ago Americans were being assured by equally eminent writers, in some cases the very same ones, that Hungary was a country which could be summed up in the picture of a decadent feudal gentry tossing handfuls of money to gypsy musicians by night and groveling before Hitler by day. One might therefore conclude from this that the Soviet domination of Hungary must have wrought some kind of a miraculous and salutary transformation in the Hungarian character since 1944. . . .

On the other hand, last April's issue of *Encounter* would suggest that in England a reaction has already set in. In answer to a letter from a reader describing the Hungarian refugees as a crude, greedy, fascist, and anti-Semitic lot, Mr. Peter Wiles felt himself compelled to admit that "the refugees are evidently a very mixed and unrepresentative bag, as refugees usually are."

I went to take a look at this unrepresentative bag, at this new generation of my native people.

CAMP KILMER is located in the gray flatlands of New Jersey. Quadrangular and bare, it is a very ugly place. Though named after Joyce Kilmer, it has no trees. There the Hungarian refugees were processed, evaluated, interviewed, paroled, nutritioned (fed), appareled (clothed), and temporarily allocated (housed). This must have been much the way the Spanish Communist refugees were processed, say, somewhere outside Odessa in 1939, after the collapse of *their* civil war. There was steam heat, cracked concrete, endless forms to fill out, the somewhat embarrassed and officious courtesy of a Negro sergeant with only the vaguest idea of what was going on. There



were barracks, numbered 1206A, 1207A, and so on *ad infinitum*, with signs bearing the long abstract names of the agencies engaged in caring for the refugees: every refugee, to be admitted to the country, had to belong to a group registered and sponsored by an "agency" (the era of individual enterprise being over even in the field of political refuge). There was a sound-truck slowly slushing through the mud, emitting the steely voice of a girl making announcements in good Hungarian and bad English, or vice versa. Then there were the refugees themselves, milling around in that endless waiting and wasting of time which all government-operated camps suggest. They were photographed and identified and fingerprinted and categorized: in a word, *processed*; they had to wear stark white laminated badges that showed their photographs, registration numbers, and fingerprints.

When the first batch of refugees arrived they were greeted by Secretary of the Army Brucker, who treated them, tired, wretched, and huddled as they were, to an incredible ceremony. "If you," he announced, "will behave yourselves honorably, you will surely be welcomed as good American citizens. Now lift your hats and applaud the American flag. I want to initiate you. I want you to know what freedom is all about." Meanwhile an army band was playing Viennese waltzes; other speakers followed Mr. Brucker, and the Jersey rain fell mainly on the plain.

Harrison Salisbury criticized the whole affair in the *New York Times*, and Princess Sapiéha wrote a noble letter to the same newspaper pointing out the tactlessness of it. They were, of course, right. Only it makes no difference at all.

**F**OR these arrivals were indeed a new generation. They had been brought up in a world of processing, of official parades, of laminated identity cards. They were used to them; they didn't bother about them—or about official speeches.

I spent an afternoon and an evening with the refugees. I found myself separated from

them by what seemed more like ten centuries than ten years. They had no memories reaching back beyond 1945. They belonged to the new, the proletarian generation of Europe, full of bitterness and pride. Communism was dead and finished for them, but so, too, was that bourgeois world which we in the West still try to preserve or at least resurrect. At first sight, I must confess that this new generation disturbed me a little. There has been an incredible "proletarianization" of the Hungarian language, so that the younger university professors seemed to speak a sort of gypsy slang. There were pimples on the faces of the young Freedom Fighters; their women rummaged in the piles of clothes issued them, searching first of all for slacks; the men took immediately to blue jeans and cowboy boots, and even black leather jackets.

What, I asked myself, did they remind me of? They were so much like our own juvenile delinquents. Well then, but isn't the potential hero a potential criminal too, and vice versa? These young heroes fought for the thrill of freedom from oppression; our own adolescent gangs fight for the thrill of freedom from boredom. It is a great difference. Yet essentially they are both in revolt against the bourgeois order—for Communism is, in itself, essentially a bourgeois, a utilitarian, a very boring idea.

In the corner of one of the shabby overheated barracks at Kilmer, a revolutionary refugee—shock of hair, lined face, sharp mouth—was spitting out angry words to a group of Hungarian Americans, who listened with mouths agape. My Hungarian friend, a liberal journalist, came over to me, whispering anxiously: "So many Nazi mugs!"\* My other Hungarian friend, a nationalist professor of geography, came over to me and shook his head: "All of them are socialists!"

\*There have been attempts to stir up anti-Semitism at Camp Kilmer by certain Hungarian American groups from the outside who succeeded in distributing among the refugees extremist newspapers containing anti-Semitic allusions. The influence of these attempts has been exaggerated. I found very little trace of anti-Semitism among the Hungarian revolutionaries.



But at that moment it had already dawned upon me that it made no difference whether "we," or indeed the whole West, ticketed Hungarians as either wonderful or dreadful. What is important is whether there are any conclusions that "we," the "West," can and should draw from this peculiar, breathless revolution. I think there are.

THE first conclusion *must* be that Communism is bankrupt. This conclusion is long overdue.

My remarks aren't aimed at those men and women whose infatuation with what they called the "progressive mentality" blinded them for so long to the danger Stalin's Russia represented to the civilized world. Their day is now over. I speak, rather, of those who overestimated rather than underestimated what they call "the deadly power of Communism."

I remember a November afternoon in New York eleven years ago. I had just left a Hungary that was losing the last semblance of independence to the armed forces of Stalin. (Note that I write "armed forces," since the effectiveness of the "Communist idea" even then seemed very small to me.) I was sitting and discussing Hungary with an agreeable young American whose position gave him some influence in foreign affairs. He showed little interest in Hungary, but great concern about France and Italy (I got the first whiffs of the Marshall Plan in that high-ceilinged room), which he saw as the next targets of Communist expansion. I disagreed—vehemently, excitedly, in the Central European way. I said I doubted whether Stalin had ever contemplated seizing power in France or Italy. I argued that what he was doing in Eastern Europe was building a big *glacis*, a conventional buffer zone to protect his tremendous Eurasian empire from the West. I said that the diversion of American attention to Western Europe was exactly what Stalin wanted. "But," my host politely ventured, "what about the Communist plans for world domination?" "You don't understand," I cried—I, the political refugee from Communist dom-

ination—"Communism is finished!" At the same moment I knew that I had made a fool of myself. I can still see the pained embarrassment, the smile hiding the anxiety on my host's controlled face. We never saw each other again.

I don't tell this story to suggest that I had been right. By no means: it was not I but the Hungarians, the Austrians, and the Poles who were right, back in 1945 and 1946; I merely reflected what I had already sensed in them. For even in the shadow of the conquering Soviet guns it never occurred to these peoples—underfed, unsure, and defeated as they were—to vote Communist. In partly Russian-occupied Austria, the Communists polled less than 5 per cent of the votes in 1945; in fully Russian-occupied Hungary they polled less than 17 per cent, and the Polish Communists themselves admitted that they could afford many things, but not a free election.

That was ten years ago. In the intervening time the attractive power of Communist ideology has faded even faster than I had thought it would. Twelve years of Communist indoctrination, twelve years of undoubted social gains for the proletariat, whose children were at last able to go to the universities—and the result has been a total rejection of the Communist idea in the satellite countries. The short-lived coalition government formed during the recent Hungarian revolution found it impossible to resuscitate the Hungarian Communist party; it did not have enough active members left to sign a new manifesto, let alone stage a mass meeting. And even today the new Communist regime imposed on Hungary by Russian tanks still shies away from the adjective "Communist." Nor do the Soviets themselves yet dare to reinstate the two top Hungarian Communists, Rákosi and Gerö—although, ironically enough, the warnings these two arch-Communists gave about the possible consequences of the post-Stalin liberalization turn have been proven correct by events.

In a speech some months ago Gomulka told the Poles that they had to struggle



against the "reactionaries"—meaning the Polish émigrés in the West—as well as against the "conservatives"—meaning the ideological Leninists left in Poland herself. I happen to be what Americans would call a "conservative," yet I have to admit that Gomulka was right. For the Hungarian revolution and the Polish upheaval indicated that, once again, Europe and Eastern Europe were ahead of the West and America. That is, the old social and political categories have dissolved.

We speak of "Titoists," but except for Tito himself there is no such animal. We speak of "international Communists," but except for a few aged Marxists huddled in New York, there are few truly international Communists left. We speak of "Stalinist Communists" when it would appear that the only "Stalinists" left in Russia are rowdy local patriots in Georgia and perhaps certain Orthodox seminarians. The "diehard Communists"—the Rákosis, the Thorezes, the Togliattis—are puffy old party hacks, relics of an age that is dead. And at least one thing is clear about the latest Moscow "purge": the issues are no longer "ideological." They have nothing to do with contending "socialist" interpretations of history. Meanwhile the new Hungarian generation is "socialist" all right; but it does not believe one word of Marx.

**Y**ET the fact remains that, despite the total failure of Communism in Hungary, the Russians returned. They returned, in full force, to stay; and their determination to stay has proved stronger than the determination of the West, including that of its most vocal anti-Communists, to reclaim Hungary for Europe. This is the second lesson of the Hungarian revolution: this curious mixture of Western as well as of Russian weakness.

In this age of social democracy it may be that the decline of nations, societies, or civilizations manifests itself in a weakening of will on the part of elites rather than in the "inevitable" encroachment of external or internal barbarians. It may well be that

the failure of Roman leadership played a more decisive part in the decline of Rome than the "inevitable" biological ascendancy of the Germanic tribal masses; that on the morrow of the Bastille it was the stunned apathy of the nobility rather than the determination of the Parisian mob which made it evident that the Revolution would not be halted; that the key to the Munichs lies rather with the Chamberlains than with the Hitlers; that the decisive thing at Yalta was not the global revolutionary spirit of Stalin but the disunity between Churchill and Roosevelt and the vagueness of the latter's ideas.

I do not want to be misunderstood. I do not, for a moment, claim that the West should have gone to war for the sake of Hungary; I merely claim that the Russian occupation of one-third of Europe was less the result of the "inevitable" ascendancy of powerful, virile Russia, or of devilishly brilliant Communist machinations, than of greed, selfishness, and confusion in the West itself.

We ought not to forget that the Bolshevik revolution itself was made possible by the war of 1914, in which the bourgeois countries of Europe tore themselves apart; that the masters of that revolution had railroad passage to Russia arranged for them by the Kaiser's General Staff; that in 1939 Stalin was able to re-enter Europe and absorb the Baltic states and eastern Poland only because he was invited to do so by the anti-Communist, Hitler; that, whatever Stalin's calculations may have been, it was not Russia that started the Second World War. And if the war's outcome was so much to her advantage, it was because she profited—strategically, politically, ideologically, in that order—from the suspicions, the quarrels, the struggles, the desolations, and the distress of the nations of the West. And she continues to do so today.

Yet there is another side to all this. The Russians have now conquered Hungary twice; four or five times during the last two hundred years they have crushed Poland. Yet the Poles and now the Hungarians, too,



despise the Russians; and despise them not fearfully but proudly. After twelve years of domination, Russian cultural influence in Hungary remains nil. One of the main demands of the October revolutionaries in Budapest was the abolition of compulsory Russian-language classes. Virtually every refugee to whom I talked was, despite the monopoly the Russians and Communists held on the press, education, radio, and publishing in Hungary, surprisingly well informed about what was going on in Germany, France, Britain, America. They may have deplored the political irresolution of the West; it did not occur to them to doubt its spiritual primacy.

Of course, Russia will survive Communism. Indeed, she has already survived Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Russia will continue to threaten Europe with her tremendous weight; she will continue to encroach upon her immediate neighbors. Yet her spirit, unlike the spirit of the West, is not *radiant*. Every Russian idea has come from the West, Marxism included. The Russians could have overrun Eastern Europe by their sheer mass and because the defeat of Hitler had left a power vacuum; but the Russian westward surge was without spiritual impact or dynamism.

It is a word that I have come to dislike, this "dynamism." I have come to believe that it is not "dynamism," "expansive force," "productivity," but resistance, resilience, self-confidence—all of them inner factors—that count in the long run. The "expansive force" of Stalin's Russia, like that of Attila's Huns, of Xerxes, of Genghis Khan, was enormous; yet their inferior spiritual potential made retreat inevitable for them. It seems obvious that the key to totalitarian success lies not so much in its own "dynamic" strength as in the weakened "resistance" of the bodies in which it settled. But this weakened resistance is not final: I think that the iambic rhythm of Gibbon's famous title may have bemused us: "Decline and Fall" may sound well together, but they are emphatically not the same things.

In the past two centuries, Russian troops

have marched as far west as Vienna, Verona, Paris. Yet they never stayed; and though their stay in postwar Eastern Europe has been a relatively long one, it will not endure—if only Europe herself recovers.

THE third lesson of the Hungarian revolution of 1956 is, I think, both a geographical and a historical one. It concerns the importance of Hungary to Europe. The fate of Hungary is not only a consequence; it is also a symptom of rise, or else of decline, in Europe at large.

It was Burke who noted that the first partition of Poland in the 18th century and the contemporaneous disunity and greed of the Western powers were closely connected. Burke suggested (though he was not always consistent in this) that the partitions of Poland, or rather European acquiescence in her disappearance, may have been an event of even more historical importance than the French Revolution. Now that the ideals of the French Revolution have waned and paled, it begins to seem more and more plausible to say that the most important development of the 18th century was not the French Revolution, but the emergence of Russia, Prussia, and America as powerful, great states.

Have not the relations of these powers—all three of them extra-European in origin—proven decisive for the 20th century? I think it is also true to say that the center of historical gravity has shifted from Western to Eastern Europe in our day, much as, more than four hundred years ago, it shifted to Western from Mediterranean Europe. The world wars of the 18th century broke out in the Lowlands; those of the 20th in Central and Eastern Europe. From Louis XIV to Napoleon III, the decisive battles were fought at Blenheim, Fontenoy, Waterloo, Sedan; in this century they took place at Tannenberg, Stalingrad, and twice at Warsaw. The explosive areas of Europe used to be the Lowlands; now they seem to be Germany, Bohemia, Poland. Instead of the problem of Alsace-Lorraine, we have those of the Polish Corridor and the Oder-



Neisse line. Despite the tremendous blood-letting they have suffered, the biological, spiritual, and other kinds of vitality of certain Eastern European nations are amazing. The electric waves of world revolution no longer radiate from Paris—they now come from Budapest and Warsaw.

**T**HERE are three milestones in Hungarian history that, placed with an astonishing chronological regularity, mark that country's curious and symbolic relations with the West. A thousand years ago, in 955, the marauding pagan Hungarians were finally defeated by German imperial troops in Bavaria, at Lech Field; from then on the Magyars gave up their nomadic habits and soon were transformed into a European and Christian nation. Five hundred years ago, in 1456, Hungary faced the Ottoman Turks alone. The Pope called on the nations of Christendom to help Hungary. The response was, as usual, desultory; but it was a response. Italian volunteers came under the flag of St. John Capistrano and helped drive the Turks away from the battlements of Belgrade. Hungary earned thereby the papal title of "Christendom's Outpost," and her continued independence for another seventy years.

But in 1526 the Turks crushed a Hungarian army that fought without allies at Mohács, and for the next hundred and fifty years they ruled most of Hungary. In 1456 the Western conscience had stirred here and there, but in 1526 Hungary was left alone: Europe was busy by that time with her own religious civil wars. There is an instructive parallel between 1456, when Hungary had Western help in repulsing the Ottoman Turks, and 1920, when Poland had such help in repulsing the Bolshevik Russians; and there is a further parallel between 1526 and 1944, when, concerned both times with her own civil wars, Europe felt she should, or could, do little or nothing to help "Christianity's Outpost" in Eastern Europe.

A thousand years ago the Hungarians suffered a painful defeat whose fruits

proved, however, most beneficial to themselves in the long run. Five hundred years later they won a brilliant victory whose fruits were short-lived. Another half-millennium later, the Hungarian nation rose in a revolution that failed to achieve its aim but whose long-term fruits have already become evident.

Nonetheless, it is not yet quite clear whether the Hungarian revolution of 1956 was a definite turning point in the history of Europe or whether it was largely futile. This is not clear because the answer, in my opinion, lies with the West, and more particularly with Europe.

I say "Europe" rather than the "West" because it is my belief that it is to Europe and not to America that the fate of Hungary is bound. That Russian infantry should parade every noon in the baroque squares of Vienna was, somehow, fantastic. It could not last. Nor could historic nations like Poland and Hungary be ruled for long from office buildings in Moscow. Yet the eventual liberation of Hungary from Russian rule must be the consequence of the gradual revival of European power and prestige, and not of the extension of American aerial omnipotence. The great European task is to put an end to the unnatural situation which sees Californian and Siberian soldiers garrisoned in the heart of Europe. It is essential that at the very least Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary should belong to Europe. It is not essential that they should belong to Atlantic or large anti-Russian alliances. It may be necessary that the strategic interests of Russia be recognized in certain Balkan territories. It is not necessary to acquiesce in the permanence of Communist terror in the middle of Europe. It is necessary that the strategic interests of the United States be recognized along the western rim of Europe. It may not be necessary that these interests, in the form of military bases, be permanently established in the middle of the Continent. For even in this so-called "air age"—Mr. Dulles to the contrary notwithstanding—America and Hungary are very far from each other.



Or are they? As I talked to these new Hungarian arrivals (we had a couple in our house one night) the picture that emerged, from under the horrible, incredible, and ludicrous spectacle that is present-day Hungarian politics, seemed surprisingly "American," surprisingly "democratic." Few people in Hungary can now afford domestic servants. Most women work. Children are sent to camps for the summer. Men get married very young. Except for a few espresso places, there are no more coffee-houses "because no one can afford not to be busy." There was the woman refugee, a member of the working class back in Hungary, whom the refugee agency was unable to tempt with the offer of domestic work at what was, to her, an astronomical salary. She did not know a word of any language other than Hungarian, but insisted, bitterly, determinedly: "I am a typist, not a maid! I am a clerical employee!" I remembered the Hungary I had left eleven years ago, where everyone who was not a manual worker himself had some sort of a scullion-maid, where women did not work, where men did not marry until they were thirty, where parental authority was strict even among the new-fangled Communist families, where business was conducted in coffee-houses, and where it was difficult to persuade our cook to send her bright daughter to a school for nurses because she stubbornly insisted that her daughter preferred to be a servant "with some family like yours."

AT THIS point we might observe that in a sense, socialism and democracy are now triumphing all over the world, even as the bourgeois era of history is on its way out. And the illusions of the bourgeois era are on the way out too: science solving the problems of mankind, the educated steel-worker reading Marx or Comte in the public library; the coffee-house, Brahms, the all-purpose maid, chess-playing, YMCA, the rolled umbrella.

Let us remember that, when all is said and done, the French and the Italian and the German and even the Russian revolu-

tions were conceived and led by determined minorities almost all of whose members came from the middle classes. But October 1956 in Hungary was a revolution made by the people—by the "masses"—themselves. (One of its tragedies was the lack itself of leadership.) In this very essential difference lies another lesson that the "West" had better learn, and soon.

Let us, for a moment, close our ears to the terminological hubbub of our times; let us listen to two anguished voices amid the tumult of this New Revolution.

The Communist Premier Gerö said over the radio on October 23, 1956: "Discipline and authority ought to be restored! We are faced with the undisciplined rule of the mob." In an interview given to Radio Vienna on October 31, 1956, the Communist Premier Nagy said: "The masses are unable to discriminate; they are all confused! True or false, it is all the same to them!" Are these the voices of proletarian revolutionaries?

The aristocratic era of European history may have closed in 1789; the bourgeois era is closing now. The aristocratic era of Hungary closed in 1848; the bourgeois era closed, not with the coming of the Communists, but with the rare, unique, savage, and heroic *proletarian* revolution of October 1956. It was a proletarian revolution because Hungary has no bourgeoisie left to speak of. The hundreds of thousands of émigrés, including this writer, who fled from Eastern Europe to the West ten years ago or more were mostly bourgeois. The men whom I saw in Camp Kilmer were not bourgeois, but they may be the material for a new aristocracy in Europe. They were, in a way, pioneers in reverse. They were rough and crude, but they had a measure of self-assurance the like of which no Central European proletarians had ever had before.

It was at Camp Kilmer that I became finally convinced that Tocqueville had been right throughout—he who was by no means a liberal trying to make the best of a bad deal but an aristocrat who recognized the



ultimate wisdom of Providence. Tocqueville wrote when he was barely thirty: "Society was tending every year more and more toward equality, and dragging everyone along with it; the question had ceased to be whether we would have a democracy or not; it now lies between a democracy without poetry and elevation indeed, but with order and morality, and an undisciplined and depraved democracy, subject to sudden frenzies, or to a yoke heavier than any that has galled mankind."

I too am now convinced that democracy is inevitable. And I only wish that I, and my conservative friends, prove strong enough to emulate the example of the young Tocqueville, who also wrote: "For my part, I wish society to confront the dangers of democracy like a strong man who knows that danger is before him and must be met, that he may reach his object; who exposes himself to it without repining, and is alarmed only when he cannot see clearly what it is. . . ."

There is one thing which we ourselves should see clearly now, and it is a very momentous thing indeed: namely, that all the notions in vogue about the decline of the West have been proven disgracefully wrong. The West may be in bad shape, but the East is even worse off. The prestige of Russia or of Communism or of Slavic Orthodoxy or of Eurasianism may be high in Indonesia; in Hungary and in Poland it is non-existent. Which would show—as does, in a somewhat warped and indirect manner, the recent upsurge of patriotic feelings in France and England on the occasion of the Suez crisis—that the decline of Europe may still be far off. What Spengler and Toynbee saw as the decline of the West is, in reality, the decline of the bourgeois West, and little else.

Of course, the trouble with the West is that it long ago lost its old confidence in the efficacy of its own moral standards. But this is not the point here. The point is that we cannot forever leave it to Poles and Hungarians to remind us of the inherent superiority of Western morality, a morality so different from those Communist or even Hindu incantations which so many in the West have hitherto admired as super-morality. For while good men do not always defeat evil men in this world, good principles do have a way of prevailing, even in this world—or, rather, it is the bad principles which do not prevail, in the long run.

**W**E WENT to Camp Kilmer on a rainy November afternoon. I drove back, late at night, toward my restored house in the Pennsylvania countryside, to my American wife, to my small paneled library, my tobacco-brown armchair, my books, my garden, my Regency drawing room, my copperplates . . . all that I had acquired in ten years, through the easygoing, thoughtless generosity of this country: a bourgeois existence. I left behind the grayness, the sharp, sallow faces, the rain at Camp Kilmer, and went toward the yellow warmth of my country home. The sky had cleared, the stars had come out, the road was dry. I was driving West, from darkness into light.

Or was I? Was I really ten years ahead of the game, ten years ahead in the West of these new refugees? Was my visit to Camp Kilmer but a singularly sharp encounter with a touch of my past? But no: I felt the great timelessness of truth as I was swiftly, growingly convinced that the road from Camp Kilmer to my paneled study was not that. I may have been driving home; but I was, also, driving from the future toward the past.